United Nations E/CN.5/2003/NGO/12

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
8 January 2003

Original: English

Commission for Social Development
Forty-first session
10-21 February 2003
Item 3 (a) (iv) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: Priority theme: "National and international cooperation for social development": impact of employment strategies on social development

Statement submitted by Franciscans International and International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres, non-governmental organizations in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council; and Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Dominican Leadership Conference, Elizabeth Seton Federation, International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation, School Sisters of Notre Dame and Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council**

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

* * *

The above-mentioned non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as members of the NGO Committee for Social Development, would like to comment on the recommendations for employment strategies to achieve the millennium development goal with specific reference to International Labour Organization Conventions and indicators.

* E/CN.5/2003/1.

** The document was submitted late to the conference services without the explanation required under paragraph 8 of General Assembly resolution 53/208 B, by which the Assembly decided that, if a report is submitted late, the reason should be included in a footnote to the document.

03-20840 (E) 270103

1. Introduction

If sustainable economic and social development strategies for lifting people out of poverty and reversing environmental degradation are to succeed, what happens in the workplace is of critical importance. It is through work accomplished in conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity that women and men of former times rose out of poverty, earned a decent living, and contributed to the development of their societies. It is the conviction of many today that work is still one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty and develop societies. Work that pays a fair sustainable wage, honours the worker and protects the environment is one of the key ways of realizing the purpose of the millennium development goals.

Background and history

Governments around the world are careful not to seem to ignore workers' rights. They champion workers' rights and democracy. They state that certain rights are non-negotiable and fundamental. National and global companies, too, parade their "corporate social responsibility" to their customers, shareholders, and even to their employees. Yet, despite this public recognition, Governments and employers still violate fundamental workers' rights.

Section 1, paragraph 5 of the Millennium Declaration (General Assembly resolution 55/2) states:

> We believe the central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for all the world's peoples. For while globalization offers great opportunities, at present its benefits are very unevenly shared, while its costs are unevenly distributed ... These efforts must include policies and measures, at the global level, which correspond to the needs of developing countries and economies in transition and are formulated and implemented with their effective participation.

Effective participation includes not only Governments, but corporations, employers and employees working in relationship to achieve the economic, social and environmental balance needed to balance the triple bottom line in today's globalized world.

According to the United Nations itself, an estimated 4 million people a year are traded against their will to work in some form of servitude (although there is no longer any State which recognizes any claim by a person to "a right of property" over another).

Against this disastrous and growing trend there is the long, admirable history of the International Labour Organization (ILO) efforts, expressed in Labour Conventions, on behalf of workers the world over:

1930, No. 29 Forced or Compulsory Labour

1948, No. 87 Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize

1949, No. 98 The Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining

1951, No. 100 Equal Remuneration for Work of Equal Value

1957, No. 105 Abolition of Forced Labour

1958, No. 111 Discrimination (Employment and Occupation)

1973, No. 138 Minimum Age for Employment

1999, No. 182 Worst Forms of Child Labour

The majority of Governments have officially accepted many of these core labour standards.

2. Recommendations for employment strategies to achieve the millennium goal (see A/56/326):

To halve, by the year 2015, the proportion of the world's population whose income is less than one dollar a day and the proportion of people who suffer from hunger and, by the same date, to halve the proportion of people who are unable to reach or to afford safe drinking water

In an effort to reach the first millennium goal, we recommend that the ILO standards form the basis for the formulation of employment strategies that will ensure development that is economically, socially and environmentally sustainable.

(a) Economic: Sustainable minimum wages are necessary for every worker

Sustainable minimum wages are necessary for men, women and youth who work either in the formal sector or the informal sector of the economy. A legal minimum wage set by a government is the least a company/employer can pay without violating the law of the country. Most minimum wage standards have a negative effect on workers and do not provide for the necessities of life. Recent studies have shown that housing needs, health needs and nutritional standards were not met by the minimum wage scale as constituted.[1]

A sustainable minimum wage, on the other hand, would guarantee that a worker's costs for food, shelter, health care, and other necessities would be met in the locality in which s/he lives. There is no law against an employer paying more than the required minimum wage. Employers could take the high road to development by paying good wages and benefits and investing in training of workers.[2]

According to ILO statistics published in 1999, employment in the informal sectors of 17 developing countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia accounts for more than 50 per cent of the total employment. In many other countries no data are even available to determine the contribution of the informal sector.[3] In any case, the sustainable minimum wage recommendation would not affect these workers. However, we believe that workers in this sector also have a right to expect the same security from their wages as those who belong to the formal sector.

---

[1] Making the Invisible, Visible: A Study of the Purchasing Power of Maquila Workers in Mexico — 2000, A Research Project of CREA: Center for Reflection, Education and Action, Inc.

[2] Talking Points, "Suggested Responses to Common Questions about Sustainable Living Wage". 10 September 2001, David Schilling Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility (ICCR) Staff.

[3] http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/strat/kilm/killm07.htm.

As the ILO states, "The phenomenal growth of the informal economy during the past three decades poses a major challenge for the ILO's decent work agenda. The development of skills and knowledge is undeniably a major instrument for promoting decent work in the informal economy."[4] Human resource development is of extreme importance. Education and training are major instruments to improve socio-economic conditions and prevent social exclusion. Training in the informal sector should aim at improving not only enterprise performance but also workers' employability and transform survival activities into decent work. In addition, we believe that Governments should establish programmes to provide a safety net for workers in the informal sector similar to that proposed through sustainable minimum wage in the formal sector.

We further recommend that all countries begin to gather and publish data on the informal sector by gender and age cohorts in all countries. These data should be part of the measures employed in determining the extent to which the millennium development goal pertaining to poverty has been achieved.

(b) Social: Alleviate human trafficking/amend immigration policies

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 stated in article 1,

> "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

Brotherhood, not servanthood or slavehood was the word chosen by the drafters of the Declaration more than half a century ago. It is noteworthy that three of the ILO conventions listed above relate to the issue of slavery, forced labour and trafficking in 1930, 1957 and 1999, respectively. The attitude of building the empire with the labour of slaves or the poor or the immigrant need not persist into the twenty-first century.

A new sense of solidarity as members of the human family needs to be nurtured. In paragraph 6 of the Millennium Declaration, the fundamental value of solidarity is upheld:

> Global challenges must be managed in a way that distributes the costs and burdens fairly in accordance with basic principles of equity and social justice. Those who suffer or who benefit least deserve help from those who benefit most.

The UNDP *Human Development Report 2002* found that, "The richest 5 per cent of the world's people have incomes 114 times those of the poorest 5 per cent."

Persons who are trafficked for labour are exploited in both wage and work conditions. Those trafficked for the exploitation of prostitution (mostly women and girls), face multiple forms of human rights violations. That sexual exploitation is often grouped as a form of labour exploitation is a denial of the very dignity inherent in work as well as a denial of the harm done to women and girls in prostitution.

In many countries immigrant labour is recruited by employers for agricultural work, meat packing, poultry processing, hotel, restaurant and construction

[4] Ibid.

industries. These are low paying jobs with few, if any benefits. Sometimes local and community charities meet the health, housing and other basic needs of the workers.[5]

In addition to economic difficulties, immigrants or trafficked persons are commonly subjected to harsh immigration laws. Immigration laws need to be developed to allow safe legal entry for workers. Trafficked persons should not be subjected to punitive immigration laws.

New choices can be made in the new century. If sustainable minimum wages are paid in the formal sector, while additional human resource development takes place within the informal sector and public sector support provides a safety net for those in each sector, parents may not be tempted to sell or give their children, their spouses or themselves to persons who traffic in human beings in their efforts to meet their family responsibilities. With flexibility of policy and training of workers, the unemployment rate and the underemployment rates can be diminished. Families will not have to be broken up when a parent or child risks the dangers of migration and tough employment standards outside the country to help the family to survive in the home country.

(c) Environmental: Balance environmental factors

The view of planet Earth from space helps us to understand more fully that there are no boundaries drawn on the planet and indeed we are one people existing together on one planet. Because of our decades of "development" and consumption of earth's resources, paragraph 6 of the Millennium Declaration sets as a value respect for nature.

> Prudence must be shown in the management of all living species and natural resources, in accordance with the precepts of sustainable development ... The current unsustainable patterns of production and consumption must be changed in the interest of our future welfare and that of our descendants.

The availability of water is an integral part of the millennium goals set out for 2015. In fact, it is conjunctive with issues of income and hunger. The *Human Development Report 2002*, states that "20 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, with more than half of the region's people, are poorer now than in 1990 — and 23 are poorer than in 1975." Development in this area, as well as development anywhere, if done in a spirit of solidarity and respect for nature, will help to achieve the millennium development goals. In this International Year of Freshwater, 2003, we recommend that corporations evaluate the impact of their operations on local water resources, and assure the access to water for the people in the surrounding community now and into the future, in the light of the 2015 millennium development goal.

3. Conclusion

Employment strategies based on the interconnectedness and interdependence of economic, social and environmental issues will result in sustainable development for all citizens on a single planet. We believe that attention to the triple bottom line by Governments, employers and employees in dialogue can significantly enhance social development over the medium and long term.

---

[5] Donald Kerwin, "Crossing the Border" in: *America*, 9 December 2002, pp. 12-13.